For A Life Beyond Governing Persons: Alternative Reflections on Political Life History in Britain (and Beyond)

R. A. W. Rhodes is to be applauded for restating the case for life history methods within the field of political studies, and many of his arguments will be found unexceptionable by those actively working with such methods. Ironically, in his recent contribution to Political Studies Review Rhodes nevertheless eschews biographical and other forms of complexity in favour of essentialising comparison. A 'British tradition of political biography' is constructed according to inert criteria lacking explicit periodisation and excluding much current work. An overstated contrast is drawn between this tradition and an Australian one defined according to quite different disciplinary and chronological parameters. This paper offers alternative reflections drawing on work on labour movement biographies developed through practices of transnational scholarly exchange and the rejection of methodological nationalism. Addressing the examples provided by Rhodes, and the use of life histories in his other recent work, we propose a life history method that goes beyond Governing Men.

Keywords: political biography; life history methods; prosopography; interpretivism

A flourishing body of work exists employing life history methods across a wide range of academic disciplines. What does this methodology bring to the study of politics? On which issues of concern to political scientists does it offer insight and illumination unavailable in other ways, and to what extent has this potential been realised in existing literatures? Is there a distinctive and intellectually rigorous approach that can be conceptualised as political biography? Or is it precisely the value of a life-history approach that it brings an interdisciplinary perspective to bear on key research questions to do with agency, identity and power?

In British overviews of the politics discipline and its research methods, these questions figure less than they might do. Typically biography figures either not at all (Marsh and Stoker, 2002) or only incidentally (Burnham et al, 2008, pp. 191-4). In the *Oxford Handbook of British Politics*, it is designated a 'mode of political writing', along with journalism and the novel, as if it were simply a medium and not a method (Flinders et al, 2010). As British scholars employing life history methods within the discipline of politics, we were therefore heartened by R.A.W. Rhodes's reaffirmation of the validity of life history approaches in a political studies context (Rhodes, 2012). There is much within his article that anybody working with biographies can readily support. We agree with Rhodes regarding the diverse insights to be drawn from life history and how potentially these extend far beyond the individual life itself. We emphatically agree that any political life can be reconstructed in very different ways. We would also commend the spirit of his challenge to national and disciplinary insularity. If mainstream political science makes too little of biography, those of us working with such methods must bear some responsibility for not often enough addressing such an audience. Rhodes's contribution has the singular virtue of making us think twice about such overly segregated subfields.

The problem is that he prefers to these the sweeping assertion of insulated national traditions thrown together in a somewhat under-researched and ahistorical fashion. Contrasting the British tradition of life history writing with a comparable literature in

Australia, Rhodes's method is the familiar and problematic one of a two-case comparison supporting (as by its very nature it cannot) an implicitly exceptionalist paradigm. We believe that the contrast is misleading and unhelpful. It is misleading because the supposed national traditions Rhodes identifies derive from the peculiarities of his own analysis. It is unhelpful because so partial and idiosyncratic an overview is of doubtful assistance to political scientists considering undertaking political biography. In what follows we provide an alternative view of contemporary practice in life history writing, and not just in the anglophone world. From this we seek to draw out some methodological implications, not only for those employing such methods, but for the wider study of politics. Rhodes asks what political scientists should do when writing biography. Diamond and Richards in their response to him (2012) ask the rather different question of what political biography has to offer the political scientist. We address ourselves to the latter question, and argue that it goes far beyond the provision of a quarry of usable data.

Traditions of political biography

Rhodes bases his argument on a juxtaposition of two discrete national traditions of life-history writing by political scientists. On one side there is a 'stolid' and empiricist British tradition comprising tombstone biographies of the famous and powerful. In this tradition public and private lives are separated out, the latter being almost discounted, and the former recounted according to strict narrative conventions. On the other side, a freewheeling and theoretically informed Australian tradition embraces innovation, blurs genres, addresses questions which go beyond the biographical subject, situates agency against a backcloth of inherited beliefs and makes use of a variety of different forms of storytelling. The characterisation of these contrasting bodies of work will be familiar to any reader of political biography. Rhodes, for example, cites more than once the late Lord Blake. Blake was an unabashed conservative in politics and general disposition whose ideas on biography attested the survival of attitudes which in many respects had changed little since the Victorians. On what basis, however, does this become constructed as a 'British tradition of political biography', which, if it means anything, must mean a tradition both dominant in Britain and in some sense distinctively so? In other writings Rhodes has propounded an anti-foundationalist position opposed to the reification of processes dislocated from any sense of agency and temporality (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010). As presumably he would recognise, traditions can also represent a reification, and discrete traditions juxtaposed in this sweeping fashion can hardly represent anything else.

There are four principle oversights and inconsistencies in Rhodes's presentation. The first is that he presents the reader with a diachronic comparison without acknowledging this or perhaps even realising it. Blake's ruminations, as rambling and opinionated as a college after-dinner speech, were delivered nearly thirty years ago, on the basis of published lives appearing decades earlier still. Indeed, almost every one of Rhodes's British examples is provided by an older generation of scholars. Several of them – Blake, Crick, Nicolson, Pimlott, Williams – are actually deceased, which doubtless will make for a tradition 'glacial in its rate of change' (Rhodes, 2012, p. 172). The achievements of works like Marquand's *Ramsay MacDonald* (1977) and Pimlott's *Hugh Dalton* (1985) are ones from which Rhodes, like the rest of us, has no intention of detracting. They do however share the monumentalism if not the piety of

the tombstone biography, and to this extent lend themselves to a circular discussion of the proverbial invented tradition in which only such writing as conforms to its presumed characteristics is discussed. One might as well cite that fierce conservative the late Maurice Cowling as representative of 'the historian's' point of view; and of course Rhodes does (p. 175).

One of the authorities on whom Rhodes principally relies is James Walter. One of Australia's leading scholars in the field, Walter contributed the essay on political biography to *The Australian Study of Politics* which Rhodes edited. From Walter, however, we discover that in Australia too, until the late twentieth century, political biography was 'dominated by an empiricist, positivist tradition – strictly chronological, favouring the public life over the private, description over analysis and the preservation of emotional distance' (Walter, 2009, p. 97). How similar this is to the British tradition as characterised by Rhodes. Rhodes's Australian examples, by contrast, all date from a later period and represent what Walter describes as 'Contemporary Practice'. Through the filters of an unavowed diachronicity, changing approaches that are traceable internationally over time are thus inaccurately presented as if primarily ones of rival national traditions.

Rhodes's second inconsistency is in respect of disciplinary boundaries. A strength of *The Australian Study of Politics* is its greater interdisciplinarity as compared with analogous British collections. Several leading historians are among the contributors. Walter himself, in describing the willingness of contemporary biographers to experiment with different genres and methods, freely cites works of political biography by historians, ones that in many cases deal with what might loosely be described as historical subjects. One could wish that Rhodes had at least adopted a consistent position as to the usefulness or otherwise of disciplinary partition walls. Instead, by purportedly focusing in the British case on the contribution of political scientists alone he commits a double solecism (Rhodes, 2012, p. 161). On the one hand, he excludes the majority of practitioners of 'British political life history' on grounds which are not upheld in the case of the Australian sources with which he makes comparison. On the other hand, where individual biographers fit with his characterisation of this British tradition he casually annexes them on behalf of political science, either wholly inappropriately (as in the case of Kenneth Morgan) or through the hypostatisation of the very boundaries which he would have us blur.

A third oversight arises from Rhodes's unhealthy preoccupation with nationally bound traditions of biographical writing. One should first of all be wary lest an exclusively anglophone frame of reference mean slipping into a form of cultural and linguistic parochialism which ignores innovative bodies of work elsewhere. But even while accepting this narrower framework, it is a commonplace among both comparativists and their critics that effective comparison means recognising the issue of interaction between comparators. This hardly needs much urging in the case of intellectual histories as closely intertwined as those of Australia and the UK. Rhodes does not inform us whether entry to his 'British tradition' is secured by place of birth or by career path, and whether it is on the part of subject or biographer. Australians have certainly made outstanding contributions to this tradition, either through writings on British subjects (e.g. Holton, 1996 and Caine, 1988 and 1993) or careers in the UK, including that of the current Regius Professor of Modern History (Roper, 2010). A few years ago, the Australian and British labour history societies made rather more

productive use of these connections by pairing up scholars from the two countries to develop key points of comparison collaboratively (Kirk and Patmore, 2005). Through what he rightly calls the perversity of his own presentation and the shrink-wrapping of competing national traditions, Rhodes has detracted from what might otherwise have been a far more telling argument for engaging with political life history.

The fourth oversight and inconsistency relates to the examples of good practice provided by Rhodes. Here the issue is somewhat compounded by the rejoinder-cum-review essay of Diamond and Richards (2012). One must of course recognise that such a response is bound by the selection of volumes received and sent out for review. Nevertheless, this in itself suggests that there are issues worth addressing that go beyond individual author preferences. Each of the nine works discussed in these articles is an example of high political memoir or commentary. Every narrative but one is produced in the immediate aftermath of having held office at national level. Each focuses on a single individual; each individual is a man. We cannot find any better examples in Rhodes's more extended writings on British politics, nor any real employment of biographical methods in the innovative ways he recommends. If he does in a limited way move beyond what he calls the 'great and good' (Rhodes, 2012, p. 162), his unstated parameters seemingly remain those of politics defined as policy process in a somewhat exclusive and conservative manner. We shall return to this point in offering our own suggestions for a more thoroughgoing employment of biographical methods in the study of British politics.

Alternative practices

There are many different approaches to contemporary life history writing and the suggestions offered here reflect our own experiences of work primarily on labour movements and left-wing political activism. Chronologically this work spans a period from the late nineteenth century to the 1990s, employing a range of genres and methodologies and engaging either individually or collectively with the life histories of both political elites and grassroots activists (e.g. Morgan et al, 2005, 2007; Cohen, et al 2007, 2012; Morgan, 2006c). We are less concerned to correct the caricature presented by Rhodes than to highlight aspects of contemporary practice of potential significance for the interplay with political science. We do so under five headings: biography as political capital; the biographical subject; the individual and the collective; within and beyond the nation; and the constructing of life histories. In a final section we propose examples of the potential uses of such methods deriving from a reading of Rhodes's own recent work on British governance with Mark Bevir.

Biography as form of political capital

If political scientists are interested in relations of power, then biography should interest them, not just as a representation of these relations, but as a resource, device or argument which may be deployed to political effect. As we pull together these thoughts, the leaders of the British Labour and Conservative Parties have been positively vying with each other in the deployment of more or less contestable forms of biographical capital in their party conference speeches (Miliband, 2012; Cameron, 2012). In doing so, they also seek to neutralise possible negative images, which in the American presidential elections have been taken so far as to question whether Obama is really an American at all. That western politicians' career paths seem ever more homogeneous and interchangeable has therefore not prevented them exploiting

whatever biographical capital they possess, which presumably helps explain the prevalence of 'mediocre "campaign"-style biographies' which appear to be a feature of the Australian political scene even more than of Britain's (Walter, 2009, p. 104).

Every life is an essentially contestable one and we doubt that even Blake would have described his sources as embodying objective truths requiring reproduction in chronological order (compare Rhodes, 2012, pp. 163-4). Certainly, such a view would not survive a reading of E. H. Carr's *What is History?* (1961), now half a century old, or indeed of Carr's own neglected biographical writings (e.g. 1937, 1949, 1950). In France the *Références/Facettes* collection specifically focuses on the diverse forms of representation and self-representation of major political figures. Charismatic or authoritarian figures like Napoleon, Garibaldi, Stalin, de Gaulle or Ho Chi Minh lend themselves most obviously to such a treatment (Petiteau, 1999; Riall, 2007; Brandenberger, 2005; Debray, 1994; Brocheux, 2007). But even less public lives may be seen as representing a form of work upon the self which scholars have explored through diaries and other personal texts, which Brigitte Studer and others have approached from a broadly Foucauldian perspective (Studer and Haumann, 2006; Halfin, 2003). What may be deployed as biographical capital is, in these accounts, not just a potential resource. It is also something for which one may held to be account, as registered and collated by adversaries, competitors and diverse forms of state or party authority. This in particular was a feature of communist parties and communist systems, which the political sociologist Bernard Pudal has characterised as a form of biocracy (Pudal, 2006). If biography is therefore itself a form of intervention, a certain reflexivity is in order as we make our own more limited interventions as scholars – a point to which we return.

The Biographical Subject

This reflexivity may most obviously be demonstrated in relation to the biographical subject with whom all such literature necessarily begins. Since the emergence of modern constructions of the biographical self in the sixteenth century, the scope for such forms of narrative has varied according to resources whose creation and survival reflect wide and defining inequalities of power and status as well as the different cultural constructions of the individual career. Beyond the few upstanding tombstones, how many are the unmarked graves which are also lives, and often political lives – if indeed any life can be unpolitical in societies as governed and legislated for as modern Britain or Australia. If all these lives are in some sense shaped by politics, some also seek actively to shape or contest political authority. This wider political agency now registers in a flourishing body of work, unmentioned by Rhodes, on political lives beyond the political class. This may be seen as an expansion or democratisation of the class of biographical subjects, from a range of bottom-up or hitherto marginalised perspectives. Walter notes the challenge provided by the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, with its 1571 entries on public servants and less than a hundred on political activists, thus providing 'relatively limited opportunities for exploring the lives of analysts, observers, dissenters and activists who failed to reach the top' (Walter, 2009, p. 99). Both challenge and response in the British tradition are not essentially dissimilar.

This involves more than an agenda of balance and biographical inclusion. Through working on these wider forms of socialisation and acculturation one is also confronted with basic issues as to how these lives at the top themselves are constituted, and the

narrower field of politics thereby populated. It hardly matters whether one thinks in terms of a single centred political tradition, or of competing traditions that may or may not have their own centres; indeed, this may be the opportunity to problematise the very dichotomies on which such a discussion apparently rests. Consider those nine of the chosen on whom the preceding exchange came to focus. Who are these people and where do they come from? Through what sorts of career path have they attained this pre-eminence, and, as these careers change over time, what does this tell us about issues of power, status, political culture and (to make an obvious point in this instance) gender? One thinks of how women's history opened up the wider history of gender relations and thus of masculinities. In just that way, the inclusion of even one female subject in the discussion might not only have added a tenth possible narrative but cast the other nine in a different light. It is not, of course, only a question of gender. If individual agency matters, as it should for interpretivists like Rhodes, how one can establish this if one considers only the self-selecting sample which represents, if not the centre, then the top?

In this area of elite political behaviour, perhaps more than any other, it might seem obvious that biography matters. The assumption that it does underpinned tombstone biographies and was more systematically and explicitly worked by subsequent students of political elites. These included early advocates of prosopography, who argued that patterns of elite activity rested on personal and economic connections between individuals (Beard, 1941; Namier, 1929; Guttsman, 1963). Even when political scientists studying elites have moved attention away from the study of personal detail, towards for example, elite political cultures, they have offered this as a supplement, rather than alternative, to biography (Putnam 1973, p. 3). Thus, in addressing the samples discussed by Rhodes and his critics biographically one may also open up much bigger questions regarding politics as a process that is shaped and reshaped over time.

The individual and the collective

By adding to the nine, or grouping them as nine, one may register the collective aspect without which the biographical subject can hardly be delineated at all. A common misconception, typically supported by casual citation of Thomas Carlyle, is of biography as necessarily representing a sort of radical individualisation focused on the agency of the one. In reality, it is not the individual alone that a biographical approach may recover. Rather it is the multi-layered complexity of the social as represented by the interconnections in any life history between generation, personal history and diverse political, religious, industrial and other forms of human capital, belief and association. The Carlylean hero was itself a social construction, not just a thaumaturge. Initially the figure was identified with the challenge to inherited authority on the part of those who had risen from the lowly and who personified and transcended what Carlyle (1871a, p. 103) called the 'new omnipotent Unknown of Democracy'. Later the hero embodied the proper use of traditional authority as demonstrated through genealogies of dynastic power (Carlyle, 1858-65). Even the Carlylean hero was thus clearly the bearer of social values and not, as Carlyle himself sometimes implied, simply their creator. What Carlyle called 'the divine revelation … which in all times unites a Great Man to other men' was basic to knowing who the Great Man was (Carlyle, 1872, p. 2).

Every life is a life of relationships, and of the making of identity through relationships, whether of the most intimate and inter-personal kind or conceived of more diffusely over time and space. At the same time, the individuality ascribed to any life represents an act of differentiation which is thus intrinsically, if not always explicitly, also one of comparison. As both the relational and the comparative aspects of the genre are registered, it is therefore understandable that life-history methods should increasingly be employed in forms that go beyond the individualised biographical narrative. Within the biographical menage, through consideration of Harriet Taylor, Jane Welsh Carlyle, Beatrice Webb or Jeanette Vermeesch, as well as their politically illustrious husbands, a radically different perspective on both may emerge (see e.g. Wieviorka, 2010; Morgan, 2006a). Wider collective biographies may focus on the family group (Caine, 1988), the cohort (Werskey, 1988), the milieu or associational network (Woodhams, 2001), or the development of movements or ideas over a longer period (Holton, 1996).

Nor need one stop at figures who have their own claims to be ranked among the elect. Blake, on noting Beveridge's dream of a biography of the 'statistically average man', found the prospect almost unimaginably dismal and boring (1988, p. 81). Conceivably Beveridge at least had the insight that the averageness of the average person reflected the limitations of the statistics by which he or she was thus depersonalised. Perhaps with this consideration in mind, a strong distinction between prosopography and collective biography has recently been proposed, on grounds that the latter alone respects the integrity of the individual life (Cowman, 2011). Rhodes also mentions how biography is usually regarded as unsusceptible to hypothesis testing and generalisation (Rhodes, 2012, p. 164). Political scientists employing case-study methods are well aware that one may work through the particularities of a Glossop or New Haven without suggesting that the small place is a Carlylean driving force in history. At the same time, legitimate generalisation from such cases is possible only to the extent that specificity and variation are also recognised. Reconciliation of these conflicting pressures always presents a challenge, but there is no more reason why it cannot be confronted in the case of political lives than in that of any other complex social phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2006). This at least is what we sought to do to the best of our ability in a large-scale prosopography of British communists (Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, 2007; also Morgan, 2006b).

In and Beyond the Nation

We have questioned the way in which Rhodes discusses political biography in terms of competing national particularisms. We do so for the simple reason that the literatures and academic exchanges through which we have developed our own understanding of this field have been of a strongly transnational character. Indeed, it is difficult to recall which recent events or publications have been devoted to a specifically British tradition of political biography, and we have already noted the dangers of parochialism in an exclusively anglophone frame of reference. In respect of collective biography and prosography, for example, our own work derived enormous benefit from a francophone literature that both empirically and conceptually is richer and more sophisticated than anything we are aware of in either Britain or Australia (e.g. Pennetier and Pudal, 2002).

What may be true of biographers is no less true of those on whom they work. It is understandable that this transnational dimension has been particularly apparent in

recent work on left and labour movement biographies (e.g. Jonsonn et al, 2007). In part this is a reflection of the proactive internationalism which, depending on time and place, was so much a part of the culture of the labour movement. But it is also a reflection of lives and careers that were less overtly bound up with national centres of power and the processes by which these are maintained. Unravel it as we may, the study of public policy within a particular state context may itself be regarded as a form of centring, legitimate as far it goes, but resulting here in an essentialised conception of political biography whose practitioners are also assimilated into some or other nationally centred way of thinking. In the lives of those who were deported or sent to fight wars, or who travelled as either economic or political migrants, or whose lives were shaped by interactions with these migrants, it would be odd if this transnational dimension did not register collectively, as it did in so many individual lives.

The constructing of life histories

Life history as a genre represents relations of power. To get beyond Beveridge's statistical average requires the biographical sources with which to do so, and these sometimes seem just about as unevenly distributed as property, personal wealth or any other form of capital. Such relations of power can, however, give rise to challenge and contestation as well as implicit deference and Blakeian genuflection. The claims of oppositional movements may themselves be expressed through the competing lives of leadership figures and others. But it is also within the capacity of the political biographer to challenge the assumptions of a top-down biographical tradition through the medium of life history itself.

Social and political historians have found different ways to meet this challenge. Through the imaginative use of such personalised sources as do exist, biographical reconstructions may be possible that in some cases amount to a full-scale life history (e.g. Liddington, 1984). In both Britain and Australian outstanding examples exist of the use of extended life history interviews by which the academic researcher functions as amanuensis-cum-collaborator and editor in producing works of similar scope and detail (e.g. McShane and Smith, 1978; Exell, 1981; Goodall, 2005). It may seem easier to conceive of large-scale interviewing projects in the case of a movement like British communism, whose activists have typically reached the age most often identified with such forms of retrospection, as well as a willingness to venture into what may once have been areas of considerable sensitivity. Nevertheless, there is also clear scope for making greater use of such methods in the study of contemporary political movements.

The life history interview in such a context may be seen as alternative or supplement to the survey method, with its potential bias towards statistical constructions of averageness and deviancy, and the dominance of pre-set research agendas over the perceptions and priorities of those surveyed. In our study of British communists, we used what we described as 'open' research methods to get beyond the preconceived notions to be found in classic political science texts (e.g. Almond, 1954) and several of our most robust insights and hypotheses derived from the observations of our interviewees. Differences of perspective matter, this is one way in which they can be registered as part of the research process itself. We suspect, for example, that the decentred state may appear a good deal less decentred from the outside looking in; and that the politics of migration and border controls may look very different

depending on whether we seek to record the histories of those within the state and those in this instance quite literally excluded from it. The general point holds good even where the forms of exclusion or marginalisation are less overt.

What do life history methods have to offer to political science?

In their response to Rhodes, Diamond and Richards had a relatively modest object, namely to demonstrate the unexceptionable contention that political memoirs offer a source of information that can usefully be consulted by political scientists. This they undertook through the disaggregation of biographical texts into usable chunks of data according to preconceived thematic criteria of their own. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, and there can be few scholars in any cognate discipline who have not approached some or other source in this way, which could indeed be extended to any personalised source of data. Nevertheless, it bears little more relation to life history methods than the casual employment of opinion polls might to the quantitative research which graces the *American Political Science Review*. Other work by Richards has shown a greater concern with the constructedness of the biographical text (Richards and Mathers, 2010). It is this aspect which most interests us. Building on the vast increase in the use of biographical methods in social science (Bertaux, 1981; Bornat, 2008; Chamberlayne et al., 2000) we believe that that a dialogue with the theory and practice of life history writing could open up important issues for the conduct of political science.

In the brief space that remains to us we focus on the particularly close relationship between political biography and the interpretive turn in political science with which Rhodes has strongly identified (and for which see Denzin, 1989). The key starting point of interpretivist analysis is the recognition that meaningful behaviour cannot take place outside of a social context. A central task for the social scientist is thus to grasp the webs of meaning and dilemmas confronted by actors. The focus of the biographer on individuals should not, as we have already suggested, be confused with a rejection of the social interpretation of meaning. Though it has developed substantially in recent years, it is indicated at an early date by work bearing a ‘life and times’ label, and in the Australian tradition of sociography to which Rhodes refers. Political biographers in these traditions have thus long been committed to the view that particular lives can only be understood with recourse to some such generality, and thus implicitly with the interpretive task of studying social meanings.

What employment of the biographical method may therefore bring into question is not therefore the idea of social meaning. Rather, it is the articulation of social meaning without reference to the lives of specific political actors. Indeed, as with generalised anthropological discussions of 'culture', discussion of social meaning in the abstract has a strong tendency to produce an account which appears as homogenous, coherent and timeless (Abu-Lughod 1991, 2008). In such a situation a central benefit of biography is that it provides a way of both conceptualising and presenting the forms of heterogeneity, disagreement and dynamics which are required to characterise political behaviour adequately.

Whatever its qualities in other respects, Rhodes’s recent work on British governance, co-authored with Mark Bevir, does not support the general claims he makes for the use of biographical methods. Bevir has independently produced work of a more biographically informed character (e.g. Bevir, 2002), and Bevir and Rhodes do make

limited use of personalised sources in their *Governance Stories* (2006). Nevertheless, in attempting an ethnography of the British state they present no real case for life history methods and no effective use is made of them. The same biographically impoverished approach is adopted in their more recent *The State as Cultural Practice* (2010). Here there is a penultimate chapter, 'Bringing people back in', which explores how 'customers, employees, and managers of the English state' understand its managerial rationalities. Although this might be thought a positive invitation to the use of biographical methods, there is again no attempt to situate the discussion of meaning in the context of these individuals' life histories.

The framework of the chapter is illustrative of the wider issue. It has sections on how customers, employees and managers respectively understand the managerial rationalities of the 'English state.' The use of such terms is itself problematic. Even the designation 'employees' is a notably partial one which appears to refer to the private offices of ministers and permanent secretaries. However, the issue is most apparent in respect of the elderly users of local social services who are designated 'customers'. As care workers 'were told' to use this term, Bevir and Rhodes justify their own usage as one that 'follow[s] local practice' (2010, p. 195). This in itself is a telling exclusion. Unlike the metropolitan functionaries, with their 'confessional, impressionistic' narratives, the voices of these individuals have not been recorded and they are presented to us in the flat, descriptive, almost bureaucratic language of the files of professional social workers. Elderly service-users are thus presented as the passive recipients of state provision and denied the voice by which they might self-identify in other ways. We would conjecture that the life histories of these individuals, all aged around eighty, might reveal other languages and 'local practices', ones ranging from entitlement and social justice on the one hand to dependency and a sense of powerlessness on the other: almost anything, one might hypothesise, but the 'customer'.

Such conjectures would appear to be consistent with biographical research in policy settings which shows that recent policy discourses which emphasise 'social enterprise' and 'knowledge-based modernization' are seen in radically different terms when looked at biographically (Froggett and Chamberlayne, 2004). We have employed just such sources in exploring the meanings of another essentially contested concept, that of 'mobility', for individuals who experienced it (Morgan, 2011). Any such life history would add something to our understanding of politics and the British state. But we know from our own interviews, often with individuals who were directly rooted in the twentieth-century labour movement, that these excluded populations also include some who might actively contest both national and local practices and who have claims upon the student of politics according even to its most exacting and circumscribed definitions.

In methodological terms, a biographical approach not only provide a means by which we arrive at the analytical categories we employ as social scientists, including the 'webs of meaning' and dilemmas faced by actors. It also, critically, provides a route to understanding the ways in which such categories are contested. In *The State as Cultural Practice*, at least in this aspect, there is little evidence of the reflexivity which Rhodes (2012, p. 169) urges as to the meanings encoded within our uses of language. Agency slips through our fingers with the indeterminate passive 'were told', with its implicit relations of subordination and exclusion. Reflexivity is

sometimes discussed as if it were some desirable quality in the individual researcher, or the wider community of researchers. Biography, however, is a register of the relationships between different individuals, including the researcher and the subject of research. This does not mean that the language and categories we employ will be the same as those employed by the subjects of our research. It should, however, mean that we are sensitised both to the issue of consistency between these differences of perspective, and to the fact that our perspective as much as theirs is socially and historically positioned. It is impossible to carry out life-history interviews in any reflexive way without one's own assumptions and presuppositions sometimes being brought into question. In the case of overtly politicised subjects, the matter of one's own situated agency can be ventilated in ways that occasionally are disconcertingly forthright. Not all biography involves such face-to-face encounters. Nevertheless, other forms of biographical research may also involve what might be called the illusion of interpersonality, and the disciplines both ethical and intellectual that this provides.

On final issue concerns the multiple overlapping temporalities with which biography confronts us. Of all the social scientist's categories, few are so often passed over perfunctorily as that of period. A simple periodisation can range from a shallow contemporaneity to the postulation of some centred temporal scheme deriving from the state, political economy or some other suprabiographical frame of reference. This is quite as legitimate as any other such conceptualisation. Moreover, there can be no political biography that does not register the impact of wider events and social processes. It is indeed precisely on these lines that individuals may be grouped according to shared temporalities through the analytical category of generation, conceived not as an entity – Mannheim's 'generation-units' – but as a relationship (Mannheim, 1952). Biography nevertheless requires that we register what Mannheim also acknowledged was 'the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous', that is, the way in which the same events were experienced as different stages in the lives of different individuals and different generational cohorts. In work on British communists and Labour Party activists, we have sought to recognise, not only these interlocking temporalities, but the further interplay of gender, ethnicity and social class as refracted through diverse milieux, roles and career paths as these were shaped over the course of political lifetime. There are many ways of approaching the study of political movements. Our only claim here is that biographical methods offer insights which none of the others can.

How often in this connection is reference made to Carlyle, and usually to the same one or two phrases that he might as well have put out on twitter. Nevertheless, Carlyle's was also a complex life history, and we might equally remember how he invoked the French insurgents of 1789 as if there were some new social actor of the 'people' whom biography as then conceived excluded. 'Governing Persons, were they never so insignificant intrinsically, have for the most part plenty of Memoir-writers; and the curious, in after-times, can learn minutely their goings out and comings in', he wrote. 'Not so with these Governing Persons, now in the Townhall!' (Carlyle, 1871b, p. 6). The comings and goings of Governing Persons were seldom so minutely recorded as by the later Carlyle. Nevertheless, in the spirit of Carlyle's younger self, we would add to Rhodes's scepticism as to minutiose 'modernist-empiricism' an awareness of those political subjects whose being governed is what politics is so often about, and who need not only be recognised as political actors in those moments when

they storm some or other Bastille, be it only a ballot box. Were they never so insignificant to biographers and others, this is not a matter of intrinsicality but of a predisposition so fully internalised that one is hardly even aware that one has left them out. If we had only one good argument for the biographical approach advocated here, it is that by registering and historicising the different positions of these other actors one also learns to be much more aware of one's own.

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